DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 125 018 CS 501 424

AUTHOR Metzger, Nancy J.
TITLE The Effects of a Rhetorical Method of Instruction on a Selected Population of Reticent Students.
PUB DATE 76
NOTE 13p.; Paper prepared for the special edition of "Communication, Journal of the Communication Association of the Pacific" compiled for the C.A.P. Convention (Kobe, Japan, June 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Anxiety; Behavioral Science Research; College Students; *Communication Skills; Counseling Programs; Educational Research; *Educational Therapy; Higher Education; *Interaction; *Interpersonal Competence; Rhetoric; Social Integration; *Speech Skills; Speech Therapy
IDENTIFIERS *Reticence; Shyness

ABSTRACT

The student who has come to be called "reticent" expresses concern about many oral, communicative behaviors, ranging from public speaking to meeting strangers and carrying on a few minutes of "small talk." A rhetorical method of instruction was utilized in a study conducted to determine the effects of treatment on a selected population of twenty reticent college students. Goal setting, including student alteration of self-perception in communicative situations and the demonstration of sufficient skills to cope with these situations, was accomplished. Assessment of the effects of instruction over a twelve-month period was accomplished by evaluation by the instructor and eight outside observers of a progress journal and five videotaped interviews. Of the original twenty students, seven were assessed as having made adequate improvement, and three were assessed as having made minimal improvement; an association between improvement and students' ability to apply rhetorical methods to communication was noted. (This is the third in a series of five papers on communication reticence.) (KS)

****
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
****

ED125018

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE EFFECTS OF A RHETORICAL METHOD OF INSTRUCTION ON A SELECTED POPULATION OF RETICENT STUDENTS

by Nancy J. Metzger*

The Problem of Reticence

As early as 1828, in Whately's Elements of Rhetoric,[1] we find speech scholars concerned with those who were unable to perform communicative functions effectively. Whately focused attention on stagefright, or the inability to perform orally in public. Some early articles in the professional speech journals considered stagefright as a character disorder or as a "lack of faith."[2] Later authorities concluded that stagefright was related to feelings of insecurity, low self esteem, and other personality problems.[3] Today, stagefright is a term that can describe a variety of experiences ranging from nerveousness or shyness about public speaking to the development of nausea, hives or even fainting when a speaker is involved in a formal presentation before others.

Initial concern about the problem of reticence arose when some speech instructors encountered certain students who sought help from the university speech clinic for difficulties not normally treated at these facilities. These students were unable to specify their difficulties, but they were generally concerned about their ability to communicate.[4] Some instructors noted, as well, that several students in typical classrooms did not contribute very much at all. Though these students appeared attentive and were apparently interested in the activities of the class, they did not participate in small-group discussions nor did they ask or answer questions. These behaviors did not appear to fit the descriptions

---

Nancy J. Metzger is Assistant Professor of Speech and Theatre Arts at the University of Pittsburgh.

CS501424

of stagefright, but they did offer evidence of some form of communication inadequacy.

The student who has come to be called "reticent" expresses concern about many oral, communicative behaviors ranging from public speaking to meeting strangers and carrying on a few minutes of small talk. He says that he is especially concerned about talk with his peers and with people of authority including teachers, counselors, store clerks, even parents.[5] Most reticents say they feel dumb and self-conscious about their attempts to communicate, so they choose to avoid communication whenever possible. An undergraduate student, Linda, wrote:

> My whole problem is that I hate to talk in front of people, whether it be impromptu or planned. It isn't necessarily just people I don't know, but a lot of times it's just a group of friends or even a group of relatives. Whenever I get embarrassed or am put on the spot for a question or comment, or have to talk in front of a group, my face turns red.
>
> I am very easily swayed, so almost immediately I am agreeing with the opposite view and then it makes me look like a fool because I change my mind so rapidly. I never ask questions in class for two reasons. First, when you raise your hand, everyone turns their attention to you and then I start to blush. Then when I ask the questions, to me, all of a sudden they sound dumb. So I don't bother.

And from Susan:

> I have a lot of difficulty talking to people informally. I can usually handle any discourse which has a formal basis with only nervousness and stuttering. However, group meetings or casual conversations are very hard for me and I usually do not say anything in such situations. Meeting people always strains me. I usually respond to them very bluntly and mispronounce my words. The hardest people for me to talk with are guys my age. I also find it difficult to talk with anyone at meals, parties, dorm raps, or in class. When I'm approached at a party, even though I might want to get to know the person, I can never seem to convey my interests.

Some reticents want to be "perfect" communicators, as they see others

to be. At the same time, they think perfection is unattainable for them. "Perfection" is usually conceived by the reticent as pronouncing all the words correctly, never pausing for more than a few seconds when expressing an idea or engaging in conversation with someone, always having something to say for every occasion, expressing it in organized and correct grammatical form, etc. The reticent sees himself always mispronouncing words, stumbling over ideas, or in other ways playing the fool, while he sees others as natural and smooth in their talk.

The reticent feels that he is the only person who experiences the problems he describes; he feels that he is an atypical communicator. In this respect, the reticent might be called egocentric, lacking the ability to engage in dual perspective, or unable ". . . to identify with the needs, values, and desires of others in order to understand, and hence, persuade them."[6] Due, perhaps, to his egocentrism, the reticent has a limited understanding of the connective function of discourse through mutual creation of meaning. Rather, the reticent views communication as formulae, routines to be discovered and perfected in and for their own right.

Thus, the reticent stands in awe of the communicative process and feels very much alone in his silence, a choice which appears to him less threatening than participation in an arena which he doesn't understand. He waits for some magic to rescue him from his silence and recreate him as a perfect communicator.

Instructional Response to Reticence

The original group of thirty-seven students selected as reticent was gathered together in 1965 and taught by six instructors who established

close contact with students in an attempt to help them "feel better" about communication and to guide them in accomplishment of self-defined goals. Instruction was geared more toward helping students gain confidence and willingness to communicate than toward improved communicative skill. Instructional goals necessitated personal conferences with students, which were cathartic sessions for some students who detailed their communication problems. Instructors attempted to demonstrate understanding and acceptance of the reticent students' difficulties.

Response to this pedagogy was evaluated as good, based primarily on changes in students' reports of increased self-confidence. It was, however, clearly uneconomical to maintain a program with a six to one student-teacher ratio. More important, changes in communication ability of the students were minimal.[7]

A subsequent approach to instruction of reticents applied systematic desensitization and progressive relaxation to help quell physical reactions to fear in speaking situations. But those who improved with this method were students who feared public performance specifically. The method of instruction was found to be ineffective with students who expressed a range of communication problems not tied to formal speaking experiences.[8]

Recently, a rhetorical method of instruction has been used with reticent students.[9] The goals of this method, strategies used, and effectiveness with reticents will be discussed in the remainder of this paper.

Rhetorical pedagogy is based on two goals: (1) revision of the reticent's perception about the communication process and his role in it and (2) acquisition of skills for increased communicative effectiveness

in a number of formal and informal speaking situations. Rhetorically-based pedagogy offers no guarantees to the reticent, but it seeks to equip him with a communicative perspective and a variety of strategies which can aid him in negotiation with others to more effective ends. Rhetorical instruction stresses communicative effectiveness as the result of mutual responsibility generated by dual perspective; it aims to teach the reticent critical questions that he can ask about goals, audiences and situations, and alternative strategies which can help orient him to a given situation. Further, rhetorical instruction aims to increase the reticent's repertoire of roles or strategies so that he may move beyond his self-prescription of silence.

A longtitudinal study was conducted to determine the effects of the rhetorical method of instruction described with a selected population of reticent students.[10] Twenty students, ten male and ten female, were selected from a pool of seventy-five who volunteered for interviews to determine their need for a special speech offering, part of the required speech course at The Pennsylvania State University.

The interviews sought to determine whether students (1) were awkward, inept, or incompetent in informal oral performance during the interview, (2) verbalized concern about their perceived inadequacies, and (3) voluntarily asked for an opportunity to work on their problems in a special section of the speech course.

Those who volunteered for interviews were asked whether they were willing to be placed in the section to be studied. They were apprised of the fact that in this section they would participate in five video-taped interviews over an approximate twelve-month period. Persons unwilling to participate in the section under these conditions were

assigned to an alternative special section.

Rhetorical instruction was aimed at two basic goals:

1. The student will verbalize an alteration of his perceptions of himself in communicative settings. He will demonstrate this alteration in response to specific questions asked about the way he feels in particular communicative settings.

2. The student will demonstrate communication skills sufficient to cope with those situations which he has defined as ones with which he has been heretofore unable to cope. Such skills will be chosen by the student. Furthermore, the student will, in conjunction with the instructor, generate a plan of action designed to meet the goals (acquire the skills), and he will rehearse in class and produce evidence that he has met the goals in performance outside of the classroom. The student will also judge his own performance and generate methods to compensate for whatever inadequacies he perceives.

The second goal involved six specific steps. The student will: (1) specify goals for his behavior in selected situations outside of class, (2) analyze his audience and aspects of the situation as they might affect his accomplishment of goals, (3) prepare alternative strategies he might use in goal accomplishment and learn a method of organization for communication appropriate to formal and informal situations, (4) rehearse these strategies with other students in small groups, (5) complete his goals in situations outside of class, (6) report back to the class on the degree of success achieved and alternative strategies which might have been more successful.

There were three methods used to assess the effects of the instruction on the students: (1) a journal of class descriptions kept by the instructor for the duration of the course from which was culled a case history of each student, (2) a series of five videotaped interviews with students over an approximate twelve-month period from which student

reports of improvement were transcribed, and (3) interpretation of these interviews by the instructor and by eight selected outside observers to assess student improvement.

The journal of descriptions and evaluations of each class session was developed following the clinical history technique described by Menninger[11] and case studies of White[12] and Riesman.[13] A student was judged improved when: (1) he defined and analyzed a communicative goal;[14] (2) he completed situation and audience analysis, planned his strategy and/or altered his goal accordingly; (3) he used structural planning to organize remarks in both formal and informal situations;[15] (4) he rehearsed a variety of communicative strategies related to his goal with the help of others in a small group; (5) he completed the required number of goals in situations outside of class; and (6) he displayed willingness to participate in and ability to sustain conversations in and out of class. Student improvement was rated as noticeable, adequate, or minimal, based on the degree to which the behaviors listed above were performed.

Videotaped interviews with students were approximately five to seven minutes in length. They were scheduled at five intervals: before the first class as part of the process of admission, at the seventh week of the class, at the tenth week (termination) of the class, approximately ten weeks later, and approximately six months later. The interviews were spliced together in this sequence for each student.

The interviews sought to determine what students believed about their inadequacies in communication and increased skill over time (specific examples were solicited), to what extent these changes could be attributed to instruction (specific examples were solicited), whether the students' communication during the interviews appeared congruent with

their verbalizations about improvement, and what students said about their perceptions of self in the communicative process and changes in these perceptions over time. An evaluation of noticeable, adequate, or minimal improvement was recorded for each student.

Four speech instructors trained in rhetorical pedagogy for reticent students observed the videotaped interviews with all the students. Four additional instructors with similar training in rhetorical pedagogy observed the interviews with some students. Based on their instructional experiences, observers were asked to record impressions, citing specific referents for their impressions, about what the students said and how the students behaved.[16] Observers were asked to record a final judgment of improvement, no change, or regression for each student.

Using the judgments from the three sources, the instructor made a final judgment about the progress of each student. These judgments were recorded as noticeable, adequate, or minimal improvement. Of the original twenty students, nineteen completed the study. Seven were assessed as having made adequate improvement, and three were assessed as having made minimal improvement.

There seemed to be an association between improvement of students and their ability to apply rhetorical methods to communication. The students who improved noticeably said that they continued to use rhetorical methods after the course had ended, while those who made minimal improvement verbalized little use for such an approach. In the interviews with students toward the end of and after the course, for example, students offered the following observations about their communicative behavior:

1. Increased social conversation with the use of rhetorical techniques (preparing topics for conversation, initiating conversation, using structural skills).

2. Increased participation in classes.

3. Use of goal setting for social conversation situations, conferences with an advisor, and in general planning.

4. Increased and more positive responses from other people which encouraged communication attempts.

5. Less concentration on reactions such as blushing, forgetting, mixing up words, and more concentration on ways to appeal to the audience more effectively in a given situation.

6. Revision of self image from that of shy nonparticipator to more capable communicator. Revision of self image led to fewer reactions of apathy, exclusion, discouragement in communicative situations. Students felt they now had a choice about whether or not to participate because they knew they had sufficient rhetorical skill to participate if they wanted to.

7. Acceptance of positions of leadership or attention. Approximately one third of the members of the class volunteered for or were elected to positions such as fraternity officer, horticulture show manager, dormitory counselor, undergraduate teaching intern.

8. Interest in additional speech classes in advanced public speaking and debate.

The methods of goal definition and goal analysis, use of the structural technique, and rehearsal of alternative strategies in small groups worked most effectively in the class. Students reported that the structural technique was particularly helpful in organizing information for a public speaking situation. It was also helpful in handling social conversation responsibilities of initiation, bypassing awkward pauses, making transitions into different topics, and elaborating on a topic.

Thus, reticent students who experienced a rhetorical method of instruction generally revised their view of the communication process and their role in it. Most developed greater identification with others which allowed them to reassess their belief that their problems were atypical and strive for negotiation with others for achievement of goals. Further,

students implemented specific rhetorical techniques in a variety of communicative situations outside the classroom. The rhetorical perspective offered them encouragement to face these situations and alternative skills to negotiate them.

The rhetorical approach to instruction offered no prescriptions, however; no magic to transform the reticent into a perfect communicator. Perhaps the few students who made minimal improvement with this method were not persuaded that magic would not happen.

FOOTNOTES

1. Richard Whately, Elements of Rhetoric, ed. Douglas Ehninger (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1963).

2. A. T. Robinson, "The Faith-Cure in Public Speaking," Quarterly Journal of Speech, I (October, 1915), 221-228.

3. Howard Gilkinson, "Social Fears as Reported by Students in College Speech Classes," Speech Monographs, IX (1942), 141-160 and Paul D. Holtzman, "An Experimental Study of Some Relationships among General Indices of Stagefright and Personality" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1950).

4. The study of reticence per se was started at Washington State University in 1962 where the first inquiry sought to determine whether reticence existed as a diagnostic category separate from those problems handled by the speech clinic on campus. Francis L. Muir, "Case Studies of Selected Examples of Reticence and Fluency" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Washington State University, 1964).

5. Larry A. Steward, "Attitudes Toward Communication: The Content Analysis of Interviews with Eight Reticent and Eight Non-Reticent College Students" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1968).

6. Joseph Schwartz, "Kenneth Burke, Aristotle, and the Future of Rhetoric," Contemporary Rhetoric, ed. Douglas Ehninger (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1972), p. 254. Schwartz refers to Burke's discussion of the persuader's development of identification with his audience. See also David E. Butt, "The Child's Development of Communication as Rhetoric" (unpublished D.Ed. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1969) for a discussion of dual perspective development. Generally, there is much disagreement about the "sequence" of development from egocentric to socialized speech in the child, as witnessed by Church, Merleau-Ponty, Vygotsky, and others.

7. Gerald M. Phillips and David E. Butt, "Reticence Revisited," Pennsylvania Speech Annual, XXIII (September, 1966), 1-18.

8. Lewis D. Kleinsasser, "The Reduction of Performance Anxiety as a Function of Desensitization, Pretherapy Vicarious Learning, and Vicarious Learning Alone" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1968).

9. Gerald M. Phillips and Nancy J. Metzger, "The Reticent Speaker: Etiology and Treatment," Journal of Communication Disorders, VI (1973), 11-28.

10. Nancy J. Metzger, "The Effects of a Rhetorical Method of Instruction on a Selected Population of Reticent Students" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1974).

11. Karl A. Menninger, A Manual for Psychiatric Case Study (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1952), pp. 80-81, 127-128.

12. Robert W. White, Lives in Progress (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

13. David Riesman, Faces in the Crowd (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

14. Robert F. Mager, Goal Analysis (Belmont, California: Fearon, 1972).

15. Gerald M. Phillips and J. Jerome Zolten, Structuring Messages (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976).

16. Nonverbal communication was viewed here as an indicator of general norms of behavior and deviation from those norms was not felt to explain the specific state of mind of an individual. See M. A. Rudden, "A Critical and Empirical Analysis of Albert Mehrabian's Three Dimension Theoretical Framework for Nonverbal Communication" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 1974), Chapter 2.